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AUTHOR Fletcher, James E.; Bolen, Donald L., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

The emphasis of archives is on the maintenance and preservation of materials for scholarly research and professional reference. Archives may be established as separate entities or as part of a library or museum. Film archives may include camera originals (positive and negative), sound recordings, outtakes, scripts, contracts, advertising materials, and trade and fan publications. Until recently, however, film production companies have shown relatively little concern for the long-term preservation of accurate film records. Also, the chemical properties of early films left them very unstable and subject to rapid deterioration. As a result, unstable film is currently being reprinted on a safety-base film for archival preservation. The Library of Congress and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City established the first American film archives, and the momentum of the film archive movement has been maintained largely by the cooperation of these two and several other organizations. There are few practical alternatives to visiting a film archive if examination of film and other film records is an essential part of a major research task. Therefore, faculty who teach research methods at institutions with or without film archives need to join in cooperative efforts to support and utilize the available film archives more effectively. (HTH)

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A BACKGROUND TO MOTION PICTURE ARCHIVES

by

James E. Fletcher and Donald L. Bolen, Jr.

University of Georgia

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"It is rather clear that there is a certain atavistic element in the motion picture in that it represents the attainment, by the use of tediously evolved tools and materials, of the precise thing that pre-historic man sought in the beginning.

The written language and the arts involving literacy and the use of the word must be understood in their true relation, as make-shift expedients, attenuated, evolved and far removed from their origins, tediously forged out of association and experience in the effort to satisfy the living picture wish, the actual re-creation of the event. If man had been a better picture-maker the evolution of language might well have been indefinitely delayed, and with it all its elaborated art-offspring and worldcultures. The motion picture is by, for and of the primitive.[1]"

Author Terry Ramsaye penned these words in 1926. We can only guess with what rapture he would discuss the motion picture and television industries of today. At the same time, a film scholar born since 1950 must wonder what Mr. Ramsaye was so excited about, for relatively little has survived by which to rekindle the flame of his enthusiasm for the film of his day.

For both the general audience and for the scholar, the activities and products of the motion picture industry past and present must be

available for study and learning. Without that past preserved in stable, comprehensible form, the twentieth century romance with the movies becomes scribbling on a sandy beach, paragraph by paragraph disappearing in the tides of time.

ARCHIVES

Bestowing at least formal durability to the sands of time is the role of an archive. An archive, according to one definition, is a collection of records.[2] Records, in turn, have been described as:

> "All books, papers, maps, photographs, or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received by any public or private institution in pursuance of its legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of its proper business and preserved or appropriate for preservation by that institution or its legitimate successor as evidence of its functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities or because of the informational value of the data contained therein. . . .Those records of any public or private institution which are adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution."[3]

In the case of the motion picture, "records" include such materials as:

Camera originals, negative or positive

Rushes

Projection prints, master negatives, positives

Outtakes (photography or sound associated with a production but not included in projection print versions)

Abridged and adapted versions for distribution abroad, for schools or for home projection.

Sound recordings, both photographic and magnetic, mixed and unmixed.

Scripts in various versions

Contracts and releases

Distribution agreements

Merchandising agreements, product and service endorsements

Writings on which film adaptations are based

Musical scores

Correspondence

Posters and other advertising material

Trade and fan publications

Papers regarding equipment innovations and custom-designed equipment

Site reconnaissance and set plans

And much more.

The emphasis in an archive is upon maintenance and preservation of materials for scholarly research and professional reference. An archive may be established in an organization with archive in its name such as the Anthology Film Archive of New York City, specializing in avant-garde film and film history. Or an archive may be established as part of a museum as in the case of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. Or film archives may be parts of libraries such as

the Library of Congress. Neither libraries nor museums necessarily include archives; this is a function accepted by or imposed upon them.

In spite of burgeoning opportunities for publication and meteoric growth in student interest, a combination of characteristics of the motion picture impede the archiving of motion pictures and the volume and quality of scholarly research about them. These impediments include: the basic system by which motion pictures are produced, the economics and complexities of film distribution, instability of the early film bases, instability of color photographic dyes, and the relative informality with which the film business has been conducted.

FINANCIAL ORGANIZATION OF FEATURE FILMS

Basically feature films are organized as either independent or subsidiary businesses. In fact, the enterprise involved in producing a feature is typically called a "company." This practice follows that of the stage but is at odds with many other mass communication ventures (imagine a magazine in which each special issue was a separate venture). This means that each feature may develop its own financing, contract for creative persons, lease equipment, settings and costumes. Even in a studio film it has been the practice to assign a share of the studio overhead, and to lease equipment and facilities from the studio. But--once the production is completed ("in the can")--the "company" no longer exists. From this point on the future of the film is in the hands of the distributor, exhibitors and the copyright holder. It has not been uncommon that--subsequent to this stage of completion--pictures have been recut, abridged, retitled or joined with other films. On the whole, until recently there has been relatively little concern on the part of producing concerns for long term

preservation of an accurate record of film production. In 1926 Sidney R. Kent, then General Manager of Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, claimed that "elaborate plans are being formulated for the preservation of all films of a historical nature."[4] His comments are the only durable element of the preservation effort he described.

One would imagine that the paper documents of the feature film would fare better--talent releases, voucher files, contracts with authors, talent and distributors. In some cases they have, generally in those film businesses that have survived the passage of the years. For others, the surviving record is haphazard or worse.

ECONOMICS OF DISTRIBUTION

For much of the history of film, distribution has been a separate business function if not a separate business. The distribution organization advertises and promotes a film, contracts with exhibitors for showings and distributes prints. The historic emphasis in distribution organizations has been to produce a rapid turnover in funds as soon as a film is signed for distribution. As a consequence, there has been little interest in preserving the past in either film or documentary form. On the other hand, it has sometimes been through intercepting projection prints and posters in the distribution system that these records have found their way into the hands of private collectors and later become available for acquisition by archives.

Considering both production and distribution practice in the film industry it is evident that strong incentives to preserve and maintain records are present only during the release of a film.

NITRATE FILM BASE

Until the mid-point of this century most motion picture film was a suspension in gelatin of photosensitive silver salts on a support base of cellulose nitrate. Were it not for the cellulose nitrate base, early black and white film would be an excellent storage medium when correctly processed.

But cellulose nitrate is inherently unstable. The nitrate base decomposes into nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) which combining with moisture in the air or in the film forms nitric acid, nitrous oxide (N_2O) and nitric oxide (NO). The gases may cause bubbles in the gelatin of the film, and with moisture causes the emulsion to become sticky.

Generally authorities on nitrate preservation identify five stages of deterioration:

1) Fading of the image or discoloration due to release of gases.
2) Adherence of the emulsion to other layers on a film reel.
3) The appearance of bubbles particularly near the core of a reel.
4) Expansion of bubbled areas and tackiness until the entire reel is a solid mass.
5) Reduction of the reel to fine brown powder.[5]

A significant problem related to the nitrate base--in addition to its inevitable deterioration is the danger associated with its storage. As deterioration progresses the base becomes highly inflammable, burns rapidly releasing more gases, which, in turn, may be explosive. One of the best

known recent nitrate fires occurred in the vaults of the National Archives and Records Service in Suitland, Maryland, outside Washington, D.C., on December 7, 1978. The blaze was spectacular with flames shooting thirty feet horizontally from vault blowout panels.[6]

The means to preserve motion pictures currently on nitrate base is to print the film to safety base (tri-acetate) film. Although this is a straightforward and relatively simple solution, there are only a few facilities where the work can now be done, and the backlog is enormous. Dr. Lawrence F. Karr, who is Director of Preservation for the American Film Institute, estimates that another twenty years will be required to print to safety stock the roughly 30,000 motion picture titles still on nitrate base only.[7] In general, any feature film not yet transferred to safety base and not yet in an American film archive is considered a candidate for preservation.

COLOR FILMS

A number of different color processes have been used throughout the history of film. The Technicolor process of the 1930s and 1940s, for example, was an inbibition process: the film in the camera was actually black and white film--three strips of it, one for each primary color. These colors were printed and dyed onto a projection print one color at a time. This is a somewhat tedious process but one in which negatives do not fade or lose color, because they have no color in them.

When Eastman color negative stock became widely used in the 1950s and subsequent years, the color was actually in the original camera negative. And, unfortunately, no color dyes are stable--all fade. Particularly in projection prints color fades rapidly. Only a few years can

mean a marked loss in color fidelity.

Endangered by color instability are virtually all color films of the past three decades. Effective measures of preservation include eventual improvements in films with more stable dyes--and cold storage for existing color films (37° farenheit at 30 percent humidity).

The physical problems (nitrate base, color fading) of film preservation underscore the cost of film archives, the specialized training and experience necessary for film archives workers and the specialized facilities required.

These facts, in turn, dictate that film archives are and ever shall be few in number, far fewer than the number of graduate programs which might benefit from the unique research resources film archives have to offer.[8]

ACQUISITIONS--PRESERVATION, REFERENCE, CIRCULATION

The film archive movement--if it may be so called--is of recent origin. The film collection of the Library of Congress began in 1894 with the deposit in the Library of Congress for copyright purposes of paper strips on which the individual frames of short motion pictures had been printed. The paper prints were deposited since film itself had not been included in the copyright law of 1864. This practice continued until the Copyright Act of 1912 which did recognize film as a protected medium. At that time, films were required to be deposited in the copyright records of the library. However, because the Library of Congress had neither staff nor facilities to maintain a film archive, a national film collection was not established.[9]

Systematic development of a public film collection resulted from the work of a private organization, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.[10] Here, in 1935 Iris Barry, the first film curator of the Museum, began a

campaign to collect film and to legitimize scholarly study of film.

The Library of Congress was stimulated by this effort and by the arrival following World War II of large amounts of film captured in Germany. But the Library's commitment in the 1940s and 1950s was spasmodic. The current commitment to establishment of a comprehensive national collection dates to the last half of the 1960s when Professor John Kuiper became head of the Motion Picture Section and when the American Film Institute was established. The momentum of the film archives movement has been maintained largely by the cooperation of these two organizations with the strong participation of the Museum of Modern Art, the National Archives and Records Service, the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, and the Film Archives of the University of California-Los Angeles.

When documentation other than film are considered, the number of organizations involved in motion picture archiving is greater but still small. The major studios have research libraries and/or archives. In some cases, they have deposited documentary materials in private or public archives.

EXPLOITING THE ARCHIVES

There are few practical alternatives to visiting a film archive if examination of film and other film records is an essential part of a major research. And the scholar should not assume that he can have easy access to any of the materials held in an archive. Only some materials may be accessible. Others are accessible on only a restricted basis.

For example, an archive of business records at a film studio is typically maintained for the benefit of the studio rather than for scholars. An inquiry to the archivist is required (1) to ascertain that the material desired is indeed in the archive and (2) that it can be made available to

the scholar. In the use of film records the archive may have a reference collection which can be examined by the scholar and a larger preservation collection which is not yet processed for reference use. A film may require repair, copying to safety film, may be restricted in use by an agreement with a donor, may be located in a warehouse remote from the reference areas of the archive. Furthermore, it is not uncommon that the viewing facilities of an archive may be limited by heavy use of other patrons.

GETTING MORE OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

Faculty teaching research methods both at institutions with film archives and those without archives need to join in cooperative efforts to support and to utilize the available film archives more effectively. When the human and financial effort required to sustain the collective resources of these archives are considered, it is apparent that too few of our scholars and students are finding it possible and necessary to use them. Urgently needed are regional working groups of scholars and graduate faculty in film and mass media who will cooperate to mine the treasures the archives have preserved.

NOTES

[1]Terry Ramsaye, "The Motion Picture," The Annals, 128 (November 1926), 1.

[2]Margaret Cross Norton, Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton Archival and Records Management, ed. Thornton W. Mitchell (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), p. 87.

[3]Theodore R. Schellenberg, Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 16.

[4]Sidney R. Kent, "The Motion Picture of To-Morrow," The Annals, 128 (November 1926), 33.

[5]Donald L. Bolen, Jr., Preservation Criteria for the Nitrate Motion Picture, unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Georgia, 1981, pp. 51-53.

[6]W.H. Utterback, Jr., "An Opinion on the Nitrate Film Fire, Suitland, Maryland, 7 December 1978," Journal of the University Film Association, 32 (Summer 1980), 3-41.

[7]Lawrence F. Karr, "Selection of Motion Pictures for Preservation and for Reference: The American Systems," unpublished paper first presented to the FIAF (International of Film Archives) Symposium on Selection, Karlovy-Vary, June 21, 1980, p. 7.

[8]A convenient listing of archives and other research centers is provided in "Film and Television: A Research Guide," Factfile No. 11 (Washington, D.C.: The American Film Institute, 1977). (Periodically updated).

[9]For the ups and downs of motion picture collections at the Library of Congress consult Doug Herrick, "Toward a National Film Collection: Motion Pictures at the Library of Congress," Film Library Quarterly, 13, Combined Number 2-3 (1980), 5-25.

[10]Jon Gartenberg, "From the D.W. Griffith Collection at the Museum of Modern Art," Films in Review, 23, No. 5 (1981), 91-104.